2026-06-28 20:39:50 **You Asked**

How did the Roman Catholic Church respond to John Wycliffe for translating the Bible into English, and William Tyndale for printing it?

Perplexity pplx_alpha

I now have comprehensive material to compose a thorough answer. Let me write it up.

The Roman Catholic Church's response to Wycliffe and Tyndale represented an escalating campaign of institutional suppression — posthumous condemnation and exhumation for the first, and arrest, trial, and execution for the second. Here is the full account:

John Wycliffe and the Wycliffe Bible

The Translation Project

John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384), Oxford theologian and philosopher, believed that every Christian had the right to access Scripture in their own language — a conviction rooted in his fundamental principle that Holy Scripture is the supreme authority over all Church tradition and papal decree. Working primarily from the Latin Vulgate, he oversaw the first complete translation of the Bible into Middle English around 1382–1384, with Nicholas Hereford responsible for much of the Old Testament and John Purvey later producing a more fluent revised edition around 1388. Because the printing press did not yet exist, these Bibles were painstakingly copied by hand — yet more than 250 manuscript copies survive today, testament to their remarkable underground circulation.[0]

Early Ecclesiastical Counterattacks

The Church moved against Wycliffe even before the translation was complete. In 1377 and 1378, he was twice summoned before ecclesiastical tribunals to answer for his denunciations of Church corruption. Pope Gregory XI issued five papal bulls condemning 19 of Wycliffe's propositions and demanding his arrest. The most significant domestic blow came in May 1382 at the **Earthquake Synod** (so called because an earthquake struck during its deliberations) in Blackfriars, London, convened by Archbishop William Courtenay of Canterbury. The synod condemned 24 "Wycliffite" theses — 10 declared heretical and 14 declared erroneous — and conducted a purge of Wycliffe's Oxford allies, receiving public recantations from multiple faculty members. Parliament and the Crown then issued their own orders for the arrest of unauthorized preachers and their supporters.[1][2][0]

Wycliffe himself, however, was never formally tried or executed. He suffered a debilitating stroke in late 1382 and died of a second stroke on December 31, 1384, while hearing Mass in his parish church

at Lutterworth. His enemies had hoped his death would silence the movement, but his writings took on a life of their own.[0]

The Constitutions of Oxford (1407–1409)

In 1407–1408, Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel convened a synod at Oxford that issued the **Constitutions of Oxford**, specifically targeting the legacy of Wycliffe's translation. Constitution No. 7 (*Periculosa*) decreed that no new vernacular translations of Scripture should be made without prior episcopal or provincial council approval, and that even existing recent translations required a bishop's authorization before use. The decree stated that anyone reading or possessing an unauthorized English Bible was subject to "the greater excommunication" and was to be "punished as a supporter of heresy and error alike". These Constitutions became the legal instrument English authorities later wielded against William Tyndale's work as well.[3][4][0]

The Statute *De Heretico Comburendo* (1401)

In 1401, before the Constitutions of Oxford were even issued, Parliament passed *De Heretico Comburendo* ("On the Burning of a Heretic") specifically to suppress the Lollards — Wycliffe's disciples and followers. The statute punished relapsed or unrepentant heretics with burning at the stake and required anyone possessing heretical literature to surrender it to the diocesan bishop within forty days of the law's proclamation, on pain of arrest. Friar William Sawtrey became the first Lollard burned under this statute in March 1401. This law, one of the strictest religious censorship statutes in English history, effectively criminalized the owning and reading of Wycliffe's Bible.[5][6][7]

The Council of Constance: Posthumous Condemnation (1415)

The most dramatic ecclesiastical reprisal came thirty years after Wycliffe's death. The Council of Constance (1414–1418) — the 16th Ecumenical Council, convened partly to address what the Church saw as a Europe-wide heresy crisis — formally condemned **45 articles of Wycliffe** at its 8th session on May 4, 1415, confirmed by Pope Martin V. Wycliffe was declared a "notorious and obstinate heretic," his writings ordered burned, and — in one of history's most striking posthumous acts of institutional vengeance — his bodily remains were ordered exhumed from consecrated ground and cast far from a Christian burial place.[8][9][10][0]

The decree took over a decade to execute. Finally in **1428**, Bishop Richard Fleming of Lincoln carried out the Council's command. Workers exhumed Wycliffe's bones from the Lutterworth churchyard, burned them on a pyre, and cast the ashes into the nearby **River Swift**. The 17th-century historian Thomas Fuller observed the profound irony with poetic clarity:[11][12]

> *"Thus this brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wickliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over."*[0]

William Tyndale and the Printed English Bible

Translation in Exile

William Tyndale (c. 1490–1494–1536) took Wycliffe's project to an entirely new level — working not from the Latin Vulgate but from the **original Greek and Hebrew** texts, and exploiting the newly invented **printing press** for mass distribution. When Church authorities in England blocked his efforts, Tyndale fled to Germany in 1524, receiving financial backing from wealthy London merchants. He completed his New Testament in Cologne and Worms in 1525, and the first printed copies began reaching England in 1526. He subsequently translated the Pentateuch (published 1530) and continued translating the Old Testament historical books before his arrest.[13][14][15]

The translation was immediately banned by Henry VIII, the Catholic Church, and the Church of England. His rendering was considered theologically inflammatory not just for making Scripture accessible, but for specific translation choices — notably rendering *ekklesia* as "congregation" rather than "church," and *presbyteros* as "elder" rather than "priest" — choices that scholars like Thomas More and Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall viewed as loaded with Protestant malice and as direct attacks on Catholic ecclesiology.[16][17]

Burning the Books: Tunstall and Thomas More

In October 1526, **Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall** presided over a public book-burning at **St. Paul's Cross** in London, where confiscated copies of Tyndale's New Testament were destroyed alongside Lutheran books. Tunstall issued an edict demanding that all copies be surrendered to him for destruction. However, the effort backfired spectacularly: to burn the books, Tunstall's agents had to **buy up the remaining copies in bulk from merchants on the Continent** — and that money went directly to Tyndale, funding an improved second edition that flooded England in greater numbers than before.[18][19]

Sir Thomas More, Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, became Tyndale's most relentless literary opponent, writing voluminous polemics against him including the *Dialogue of Heresies* and the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, accusing him of "pestilent" malice and deliberate doctrinal corruption. Book burnings at St. Paul's Cross became a regular occurrence, though the mass production of the printing press made total suppression impossible.[17][16]

Arrest, Trial, and Execution (1535–1536)

Unable to seize Tyndale in England (he never returned after 1524), authorities pursued him through a network of informants on the Continent. In 1535, a young Englishman named **Harry Phillips**, who had presented himself as a sympathetic reformer, befriended Tyndale at the English merchant house in Antwerp, where he had been living under relative protection. Phillips was in fact working as an informant for the Imperial Court and perhaps for English authorities hostile to Tyndale. On May 21, 1535, Phillips lured Tyndale out of the English House by claiming he had no money and asking Tyndale to take him to dinner. As they walked through an alley, two guards arrested Tyndale.[13]

Tyndale was imprisoned in the **Castle of Vilvoorde**, near Brussels, for sixteen months. Thomas Cromwell attempted to secure his release, but Henry VIII — still furious at Tyndale's earlier opposition

to the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon — refused to intervene. Tried for heresy before an Imperial court, Tyndale was condemned.[15][13]

On **October 6, 1536**, William Tyndale was brought to the public execution ground at Vilvoorde. He was **strangled at the stake first** (though accounts indicate the strangling was botched and he may have been partially conscious), and then his body was **burned**. According to the martyrologist John Foxe, his final words cried out with "a fervent zeal and loud voice" were: **"Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"**[20][13]

The Irony of Tyndale's Legacy

The prayer proved prophetic with startling speed. Within **three years** of Tyndale's execution, Henry VIII had authorized the publication of the **Great Bible** (1539) — a translation compiled largely from Tyndale's own work — and ordered a copy placed in every parish church in England. Within four years of his death, four English translations had been published in England, all substantially based on his scholarship. Over 90% of the King James Version New Testament (1611) and 75% of the Old Testament draw directly from Tyndale's translation.[21][22][20]

The Pattern of Institutional Response

The Church's escalating responses to both men follow a revealing arc:

Action	Against Wycliffe	Against Tyndale
Theological condemnation	Blackfriars Synod (1382), 24 theses condemned	Bishops' public denunciations (1526+)
Censorship legislation	Constitutions of Oxford (1408)	*De Heretico Comburendo* (1401) applied
Destruction of texts	Books burned per Council of Constance	Books burned at St. Paul's Cross repeatedly
Physical punishment	Posthumous: bones exhumed and burned (1428)	Execution: strangled and burned (1536)
Scope of condemnation	Ecumenical Council of Constance (1415)	Imperial court trial, Vilvoorde (1536)

The Church's fundamental objection was not merely philological — it was ecclesiological and political. Both men represented the terrifying possibility that laypeople, armed with Scripture in their own language, might measure Church doctrine directly against the biblical text and find the institution wanting. As one clergyman reportedly told Tyndale when he pressed for an English Bible: *"We are better to be without God's laws than the Pope's"* — and Tyndale's defiant response, *"I defy the Pope and all his laws,"* sealed his fate.[5][17][0]